

Caught in the Act

AFTER witnessing the ease with which Wishbone Ash scored a resounding victory at Croydon's Fairfield Halls on Sunday night, it was hard to believe that we'd just seen a band that hadn't played in Britain in two years and that has been regarded more or less as fallen idols since that departure.

Ash played with a vigour and confidence that totally wiped out the memory of the lean years. It was as if, four years later, they'd just begun to feed off the success and inspiration of their acclaimed "Argus" album. Although the early part of the set was a little tedious, once Ash had proved their virtuosity and stepped the tempo up, there was no way that they were going to fail.

The two guitarists, Andy Powell and Laurie Wisefield, tossed about solos and dual lead runs with a vengeance, and the success of this gig was certainly down to their performances on the night. Wisefield is the man who, two years ago, had the unenviable task of taking over from original guitarist Ted Turner, and, judging from his playing on Sunday, his arrival in Ash and their subsequent fall from grace, is mere coincidence.

Powell was full of confidence, smug occasionally, as if to say "we told you we were still good." Wisefield and Powell proved most of all that Wishbone Ash is still primarily a guitarists' band, with everything else woven into that fabric.

The songs need not necessarily be exceptional when two players of their calibre are around to carry them. I'd been told that the band were weak on vocals but saw no evidence of that in the voice of bass player Martin Turner, although he depended a little too much for his sound on the echo chamber of the mixing desk.

But I can't understand why Andy Powell didn't take more of the vocals; he was superb on the encore, "Bad Weather Blues." Turner and drummer Steve Upton, the founder members of Ash, were an excellent rhythm section.

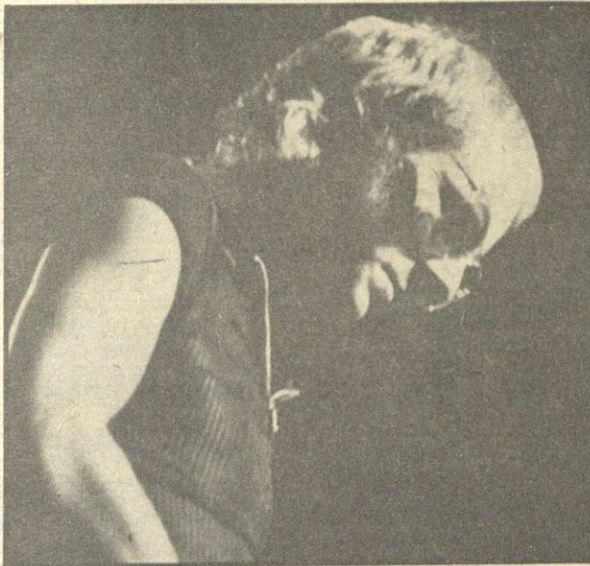
It was significant that the material played from the last two albums, "There's The Rub" and "Locked In," was sparse; as significant as the fact that the songs from the new album, "New England," with "(In All Of My Dreams) You Rescue Me" and "Lorelei" best, stood up well against the material used from "Argus." If Sunday night in Croydon is anything to go on, Wishbone Ash have recuperated. — HARRY DOHERTY

SOPRANO SUMMIT

ONE of the expected merits of a Soprano Summit performance is the quality and variety of the tunes you hear. Bob Wilber and Kenny Davern are jazz scholars, as well as good all-round musicians, who collect fine musical pieces from a number of different sources and whose interpretations, while always original, often pay tribute to great men and bands of yesterday: Sidney Bechet, Oliver's Creole Band, Jimmie Noone's Apex Club combo, Johnny Dods, Duke Ellington and so forth.

At the Pizza Express in London's Dean Street last Friday, the Summit — completed by a well-integrated rhythm trio of Dave Cliff, Peter Ind and Lennie Hastings — warmed up with a nice old popular song, "Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland," which in Wilber's arrangement made a convincing jazz vehicle, with plenty of agile interweaving by Bob's clarinet and Davern's forceful soprano.

Next, from the group's new Chiaroscuro LP, came Duke's "Black And Tan Fantasy" — rich sopranos, solo and entwined, plus interesting Cliff guitar — followed by a Wilber stomp (inspired by King Oliver)



WISHBONE ASH'S ANDY POWELL: full of confidence and occasionally smug

Hail to the exiles

for two clarinets which sounded a bit studied and short on drive when compared in the memory with the stomping power of Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Ind's solo bass was a notable (and anachronistic) feature. The shades of Bechet were invoked by a fresh and very melodic version of "I Had It But It's All Gone Now," one of his less celebrated compositions.

Kenny Davern, sharp-tongued and sardonic, had proved himself an amusing announcer-raconteur for most of the set, though the more gentle Wilber was permitted to introduce "Ole Miss." The set was, typically, tasteful and varied but to my senses a fraction too polite and down on drive. Set Two included "Oriental Strut," the sentimental "Song Of Songs" (recalling Bechet again), a Noone-type "Linger Awhile," clarinet-filled "Old Stackolee Blues" and bouncing "Oh Sister" with sax and clarinet hitting a Joe Poston-Jimmie Noone groove, and was stronger for swing and exhilaration.

By early morning, the band's rhythm was opening out and Hastings in particular emerging from beneath metaphorical wraps to sock out a dancing beat on Bechet's "Fish Vendor." "The Mooche" and "Chalumeau Blues" were other items in a more musically satisfying final set. — MAX JONES

SAILOR

SAILOR are just beginning to find that, like the tide, success can go every bit as fast as it comes in, and two successive bomber singles and a half-empty Bristol Hippodrome suggest that it's at present ebbing rapidly. The fact is apparently not lost on the band who, despite gallant attempts to disguise it, seemed to breathe a certain air of despondency during their performance last

climaxed their set with "Glass Of Champagne", "Stiletto Heels" and a curious instrumental pastiche of the two, none of which were remotely impressive. The idea of them appearing in The Voyage Of Sinbad holds far greater interest.

When Sailor first emerged a couple of years ago, much was made of the fact that they were formed in a dingy Amsterdam club, and it's to there I suggest they return until they can produce some altogether hotter material and a more diverse sound, because the road they're on at the moment leads to no Aladdin's cave. — SIMON KINNERSLEY.

LYNYRD SKYNYRD

NEW YORK: For a bunch of rowdy cowboys with a taste for Jack Daniels as great as their taste for ear-shattering rock and roll, Lynyrd Skynyrd have come a long way in a relatively short time. Their just-released live album is nudging its way into the US top ten album chart, and the touts appeared to be doing good business outside the Palladium Theatre where they did a couple of concerts last weekend.

Though pretty basic in their approach, Skynyrd's use of three lead guitars sets them aside from the rest of the boogie bands to have emerged from America's Southlands. This, coupled with a basic approach to "the people," and a phenomenal work-rate, has assured them of an enviable concert following. On their next visit to New York it's a sure bet that they'll be at the Garden.

Most of the material they played on Saturday evening can be found on their live album, although they did introduce one new tune into the set. For New York they also introduced new guitarist Steve Gaines, whose contribution was just as heavy as that of their established guitarists, Allen Collins and Gary Rossington. All three share their duties democratically, particularly when they line up and punch out chords in military precision.

The set opened with "Working For MCA," their usual opener, but the highlights seemed to be the martial "Gimme Three Steps" and "Sweet Home Alabama" which closed the show before two encores, "Crossroads" and "Freebird."

The practice of saving one's best number for the second encore seems somewhat calculated, but "Freebird" soared with its usual intensity. Breaking out from the melodic opening verses to the electrifying guitar solos layered over Artimus Pyle's double-time drumming. On this number in particular Ronnie Van Zant's singing was superior to the track on the live album.

Zant, his usual barefooted self, presents a grim, tough front. One suspects he would happily punch his guitarists in the face should they fluff a solo. To complement the staggering volume, Skynyrd imported the largest lighting rig I've ever seen in a theatre this size: four supertroopers, each on a high platform and manned by precariously balanced operators, bathed the band in brilliant colours throughout. — CHRIS CHARLESWORTH.